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ABSTRACT

Creative dramatics (the spontaneous expression of feelings and ideas in an imaginative manner) brightens the reading program and provides teachers and students with both enjoyable and academically profitable experiences. Any reading teacher can comfortably integrate creative dramatics into the basal reading program. Activities such as creating spontaneous dialogue, pantomime, and developing puppet shows get students physically and joyfully involved as they extend what they read. Creative dramatics nurtures creative approaches to problem solving in teachers and students. Suggestions for creative drama and pantomime in the classroom setting are provided. (Fifteen references are attached.) (RS)

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Enhancing Reading Comprehension through Creative Dramatics

Evelyn M. Dwyer

Creative dramatics is the spontaneous expression of feelings and ideas in an imaginative manner. A more formal and comprehensive description was reported by Cox (1988) who cited Davis and Beam (1978). Davis and Beam eloquently and comprehensively described creative dramatics as "an improvisational, non-exhibitional, process-centered form of drama in which participants are guided by a leader to imagine, enact, and reflect upon human experience...(pg.359). Creative dramatics in the reading classroom encourages children to become emotionally as well as academically involved in stories and content oriented reading. Such involvement encourages comprehension through multi-sensory experiences.

The main purpose of this article is to provide suggestions for enhancing basal lessons with creative dramatics. Basals are emphasized since this mode of reading instruction is so prevalent. Cheek, Flipppo, and Lindsey (1989) suggested that basal programs are the "primary approach for teaching reading" (pg. 246). Attention to direct reading skills instruction, however, is beyond the scope of this article. This limitation, however, is not meant to minimize the importance of what precedes creative exploration via drama as a form of closure for basal reading lessons. Instructional paradigms such as the Directed Reading-Thinking Activity (Haggard, 1988) flow naturally into creative dramatics with guidance from the teacher.

There is no one set of acceptable approaches for creative dramatics in the reading program. Rather, creative dramatics is a way of

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thinking, a way of responding to the message in a story keeping in mind the competencies and needs of the students.

Galda (1982) determined through a study of 108 children in kindergarten, first, and second grades that creative play leads to richer and more comprehensive comprehension of stories. Galda also concluded that active reconstruction through play encouraged the children to develop a sense of story. Sense of story in Galda's context involves understanding characters and their motivations for behaving in certain ways, the dynamics of cause and effect, and the logical sequence of the beginning, middle and end of a story. Galda encouraged teachers to become active participants by modeling creative play and encouraging student participation. Galda concluded that creative play "works to help children become happier and better readers" (pg.55).

While Galda stressed the academic advantages accompanying creative play, McCaslin (1974) philosophically stressed the aesthetic reasons for encouraging creative play in suggesting that "in every human being there exists the impulse to mime and to play" (pg.1). The reading teacher can take advantage of this powerful impulse to play as a means to promote both enjoyment and competence.

Cox (1989) persuasively argued that there is a natural and strong connection between drama and reading. In this light, she suggested that both drama and reading encourage language, perceptions, concept development, and aesthetic appreciation. Evaluation of research, experience, and theory led Cox to several major conclusions:

1. Dramatization of literature encourages motivation for reading.
2. Dramatization of literature enhances vocabulary.

3. Drama encourages development of comprehension in general and critical reading competence in particular.
4. Drama can be a means for the teacher to encourage guided extended reading. That is, motivation levels attained during creative dramatics effectively invite children to engage in more reading in the same or a similar area.
5. Drama encourages children to become lifetime readers.

Harp (1988) presented a hypothetical encounter between a classroom teacher and the school principal. The teacher had just completed a creative dramatics activity: the principal questioned the value of creative dramatics. The principal contended that the creative dramatics essentially took time away from reading. Harp proceeded to advise the teacher, highlighting the following points:

1. Drama motivates children to read.
2. Each of the many forms of creative drama brings excitement to learning.
3. Drama is a natural companion to reading. When children dramatize, they are drawing on the "same language and thinking skills they use in reading" (pg. 939).
4. Drama encourages creativity in children and makes learning enjoyable.

Harp supported his views with several convincing citations from research concerning the relationship between drama and reading success.

Gray (1987) conducted an empirical study involving 21 sixth graders from a mainly black lower middle socio economic background. The 11 members of the experimental group engaged in creative drama while studying a basal story while the 10 members of the control group only

discussed the story. Despite limitations reported by the researcher concerning numbers of subjects and lack of comprehensiveness, overall analysis of data led Gray to conclude that "the data seem to support the hypothesis that students who dramatically reenact stories achieve significantly higher scores on a post reading comprehension test than those who do not engage in the reenactment" (pg. 9).

Burnes, Roe, and Ross (1988) determined through analysis of studies that dramatics can improve readiness for reading, vocabulary, and oral reading ability in children from kindergarten through junior high school. Further, Burns, Roe, and Ross suggested that the "active reconstruction of a story through drama focuses children's minds on characters, setting, and plot of a story" (pg. 229).

The brief review of literature presented above provides convincing evidence supporting the contention that creative dramatics has both aesthetic and academic value in the reading program. In the following section, specific ideas will be presented concerning implementing creative dramatics in the reading program.

Creative Dramatics with Basal Stories

As mentioned above, direct instruction through a procedure such as the Directed Reading-Thinking Activity usually controls the formal application of skills and formal evaluation of comprehension. However, moving into creative dramatics can greatly encourage comprehension while inviting children to enjoy creative play. The move to creative dramatics should not be abrupt but naturally flow from what is discussed through comprehension study and evaluation. Although the usual procedure is for creative drama to follow story reading, Prentice and Talbert (1978) argued persuasively for frequent inclusion of creative

drama before story reading. Prentice and Talbert suggested that including creative dramatics before story reading helps students raise many questions that can only be answered through reading the story. The guidelines described herein are usually more appropriate after story study, but keeping in mind the suggestion proposed by Prentice and Talbert for occasional pre-reading creative dramatics activities is recommended.

1. Ask general but thought provoking questions such as: Who was your favorite character in the story? What are some things your favorite character did that you would like to do? How did you feel when...? What character did you like least? Do you want to show me how you think the character acted when he/she felt this way?
2. Invite several children to each select a character from the story read and improvise a scene from it in play form. They can rehearse and then present the scene for their reading group or even a whole class. As many small groups can be formed as are needed to include all the readers. Improvisation, in this light, simply means paraphrasing a part of a story (or content material) in play form. For example, students might enhance the dialogue between Abe Lincoln and his mother concerning Abe's desire to go to school as portrayed in the basal story "A Surprise for Abe" (Swinburne, 1986). They might also include Abe's father and brothers and sisters and invent dialogue for them. This activity can be naturally extended to a language arts project involving writing a play based on the story read.

The teacher, ever alert for opportunities for instruction, can teach the children about historical fiction in an incidental manner as the children try to recreate a happening from long ago.

3. Children can pantomime parts of a story while classmates try to determine what is taking place. Pantomime requires attention to both main ideas and important details in a story. For example, children could pantomime the story of the Cherokee Indian named Sequoyah who created written language for his people as described in "The Talking Leaves" (Benjamin, 1983). This story does not produce high levels of excitement but is very thought provoking with a deeply moving message. Pantomime of events such as how Sequoyah's early efforts to produce signs for all the Cherokee words led to frustration. This could be followed by dramatization of how he came to appreciate the concept of using syllables. Such dramatic expression would lead to greater comprehension both of the story itself and the structure of alphabetic languages including English.

4. Creative drama can be encouraged through puppetry. Shy students when using puppets often explore areas of language and drama they would not ordinarily experience. Durkin (1989) suggested inviting children to make tapes of plays and while the tape is playing the children could make the puppets perform. Burns, Roe, and Ross (1988) advised using a tape recording of the script to help some children with the task of learning hand movements. When the children

become more competent with hand movements they can more easily speak and manipulate puppets at the same time. This approach combines oral reading for communication with creative expression as students spontaneously interact with the text.

Weiger (1974) presented detailed descriptions for making and creatively manipulating various kinds of puppets including stand up lunch bag puppets, fist puppets, finger puppets, hand puppets, and sock puppets. Weiger suggested that puppets encourage participation of all but the most recalcitrant children. One important advantage Weiger noted was that fear of mistakes, often a major cause of lack of confidence in children when it comes to expressing themselves, can be greatly lowered and sometimes eliminated entirely since errors can be blamed on the puppets.

5. Special attention can be given to developing specific competencies. For example, children might be invited to act out a series of events in sequence. If children demonstrate difficulty with sequencing, the correct order of events can be placed on the chalkboard as the story is discussed. Later, children can act out the sequence to reinforce both knowledge of the specific story and the concept of sequencing.

6. Children might replay the same story or part of a story several times. Reenactments usually lead to richer plots, more comprehensive character development, and greater comprehension. Questions necessitating creative responses

can be asked. For example: What would you do differently if you were the character (name the character)? What do you think the character(s) will do next? Invite the children to dramatize an event evolving from a story.

After dramatic play, children might be invited to write a sequel to the story. This activity gets away from creative dramatics but demonstrates the power of drama in encouraging creative writing.

Creative dramatics is a way of thinking and not a set of procedures. Planning is essential but is general. A note of caution is in order. Sometimes there is a thin line between creative dramatics and theatre. Creative dramatics is process oriented and spontaneous. Dialogue is never written down or memorized. The focus is not on performance but on creative expression. This is not to diminish the value of theatre in any way but only to focus on the concept of creative dramatics relative to the suggestions made in this paper.

Summary

Creative drama brightens the reading program and provides students and teachers with both enjoyable and academically profitable experiences. Any reading teacher can comfortably integrate creative dramatics into the reading program. Activities such as creating spontaneous dialogue, pantomime, and developing puppet shows get students physically and joyfully involved as they extend what they read. Creative dramatics nurtures creative approaches to problem solving in both teachers and students. The effort, itself, is most enjoyable and the rewards are substantial.

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